

**WASHINGTONIANA DIVISION
D.C. COMMUNITY ARCHIVES**

Guide to the Joseph Owen Curtis Photographic Collection, 1910-1989

Collection No. P7
1.50 linear ft (4 boxes)

June 2001

D.C. Public Library
Washingtoniana Division
D.C. Community Archives
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SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection contains approximately 270 black and white prints and 83 slides, the majority of which document the culture, social life, and architecture of Southwest Washington, D.C. in the 1930s through the 1950s. The many images of streets, businesses, and buildings provide important visual documentation of the architecture and social life of Southwest before and after urban renewal from the 1930s to the 1980s. Of importance are photographs of the Willow Tree Athletic Club and football team, numerous buildings, scenes of neighborhood streets, and World War II era photographs, both overseas and back home. Other photographs are of scenes from Randall playground and Randall Junior High school students, both in the 1930s and from reunions in the 1950s and 1980s. Slides include 27 images selected from the black and white prints, primarily taken before urban renewal (1910s-1950s), and corresponding color slides of the same geographic area photographed by Curtis in the 1980s.. The collection also contains photographic copies of programs, announcements, invitations, obituaries, and other items relating to the social and artistic life in Southwest.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Joseph Owen Curtis was born in 1915, and lived in Southwest Washington, D.C. for most of his life. Hamilton and Aurena E. McNeil Curtis raised Joseph Owen Curtis and his older brother William DuBois Curtis. Curtis attended Randall Jr. High School, Dunbar High School, Miner Teachers College, and Howard University. He served in World War II along side other Southwest residents. Curtis worked at the Naval Research Laboratory organizing data as a math technician.

Hamilton Curtis, Curtis' father, gave Owen his first camera at the age of 11. His father encouraged him to learn photographic development to defray the cost of developing his images. Curtis worked as a snack vendor at local sporting events to pay for the 25 cents rolls of film he used. Curtis photographed the buildings, people, daily interactions, social events, and street scenes of the African-American community in Southwest in which he grew up between World War I and II. By the 1950s when urban renewal was planned for southwest, a majority of its residents were African-American and nearly 2/3 were low-income. Urban renewal reshaped and forever changed the landscape and culture of Southwest.

Curtis became active in civic affairs when redevelopment plans for Southwest began to take shape in the late 1940s. In 1949 Curtis joined the Southwest Civic Association. After joining, he

was appointed chairman of the Redevelopment Committee. Congress chartered the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), a new city agency, in 1946 with considerable power to condemn and redevelop the City. In a 1950 report, the RLA characterized Southwest as "obsolete" and in need of major redevelopment. Curtis and his fellow community residents feared they would be displaced as a result of development. Most of their fears were realized when very few original residents of Southwest were able to afford to return to their neighborhood after redevelopment occurred. Mr. Curtis still lives in Southwest.

The Washington Post, March 16, 1995

The Washington Afro-American, October 6, 1979

Kathryn Smith (ed.), *Washington At Home*, "Southwest Washington: Where History Stopped," Chapter 5, by Keith Melder, Windsor Publications, 1988.

PROVENANCE:

In 1979 Joseph Owen Curtis brought in a sample of his photography to Lessie Owens, former head Librarian, District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL), Southwest Branch. Ms. Owens was organizing the library's annual Festival of the Arts. The images made such an impact on the library staff that a permanent exhibition was established of Curtis Photography. The images were then transferred to Martin Luther King Memorial Public Library and accessioned in 1998.

PROCESSING PROCEDURES

Curtis identified all images by person, subject, location, place, and date. The information Curtis documented on each image was used extensively to arrange and describe the collection. In addition, many photographs have rich detail that places the image in an historical context. Part of the research value of the collection comes from this rich detail which includes Curtis' personal stories, memories, and experiences. Information in Curtis' notes about any known photographers, other than himself, is provided in the box inventory for easy reference. (see below for restrictions).

General processing procedures consisted of grouping the images together by subject and then by date. Images are arranged in forward chronological order, with undated records appearing at the end of the folder. The images are in protective plastic Mylar enclosures.

RESTRICTIONS

Some photographs are reproductions of images taken by friends and family members of Joseph Owen Curtis as well as reproductions of Scurlock Studio images. In addition, some of the images include reproductions of newspaper clippings, obituaries, public school activities, and social engagement advertisements. When a photograph or other item is reproduced from an image for which Mr. Curtis does not hold copyright, it is the responsibility of the researcher to obtain permission from the person or institution holding copyright. Scurlock Studio images are housed in the Records Center at the American History Museum at the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian should be contacted to obtain permission to reproduce any Scurlock Studio images.

The collection is arranged into the following series:

Series I: Groups and individual shots

Series II: Special subjects

Series III: Streets and Buildings

Series IV: Family and Personal

Series V: Memorabilia

Series VI: Slides

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

Series I: Individuals and Groups, .50 cubic ft. (1910-1982)

The series consists of photographs of single individuals and group shots not part of other series in the collection. It contains snapshots of friends and family of Curtis, including John T Rhine, an African-American businessman in Southwest in 1910, Curtis' boyhood friends with colorful nicknames from the 1930s and 1940s, and Leon Calhoun, President of the S.W. Civic Association in 1951. Groups are pictured at parties, christenings, holidays, funerals, and weddings as well as favorite gathering spots such as Doc Johnson's store, Randall Jr. High, Delaware Avenue, and 4th Street. Folders are separated by individual and group shots and then arranged in chronological order.

Series II: Special Subjects, .25 cubic ft. (1926-1989)

Photographs in this series consist of a number of photographs on recurring and significant subjects. Of particular interest are a number of images of the Willow Tree Athletic Club and its football team which was organized and played at the Randall Playground, formerly known as the Cardozo Playground, from the 1930s through the 1950s. It also includes images of Bruce Wahl's, a popular café and nightspot on the Southwest waterfront frequented by black

Washingtonians after WWII to the late 1950s; reunions in 1957 and 1973 of graduates of Randall Jr. High school, the Willow Tree Benevolent Association, organized by former members of the Willow Tree Athletic club; Randall High students in the 1920s, 1930s and 1980s; and ROTC cadet competitions in black high schools in the 1920s and 1930s. Files are arranged by topic in alphabetical order.

Series III: Streets and Buildings, .25 cubic ft. (1930-1989)

The series contains photographs of houses, businesses, and the street life of Southwest. Since the focus of the images is either a street or a building, Curtis does not identify people in the photographs from the neighborhood. Streets covered include businesses and houses along lower 4th Street (600 to 1200 block), F and G Street to the 600 block, Delaware Avenue, "M" and Half Streets, and alley life at 2nd and I Streets. Buildings and landmarks include the water tower, Johnson's drugstore, railway viaduct, Cardozo Vocational school, Cardozo Elementary School, and Southeast Community House. Some photographs provide a comparison between views before and after urban renewal. Folders are arranged by date.

Series IV: Family and Personal .15 linear ft. (1917-1982),

The images in this series depict Curtis with family and friends as a boy growing up in Southwest, at Miner Teachers College, and during World War II with Army buddies in uniform. Among the WWII images is a photograph of General Eisenhower who visited Curtis' camp in France. Prints from Scurlock Studios in this series include Curtis as a choirboy in the St. Augustine's Catholic Church Sanctuary Choir and as part of Miner Teachers College's 1937 graduating class.

Series V: Memorabilia, .10 linear ft. (1926-1984)

The series contains photographic reproductions of ephemera related to events or residents of Southwest. Reproductions are of newspaper clippings, publicity flyers, school theater programs, announcements, obituaries, event programs, and party invitations.

Series VI: Slides, .25 ft. (84 slides), ca. 1914-1982

The series contains 25 black and white slides of images selected from prints in the collection. The black and white slides cover the period before urban renewal from approximately the 1910s to the 1950s. To provide a comparison between the streetscapes before and after renewal, Mr. Curtis in the 1980s selected streets captured in the earlier black and white images and then took multiple shots in color of the same street corners. A total of 59 color slides are included in the collection for comparison. The slides are arranged using the numbering system Mr. Curtis devised.

BOX INVENTORY

Series I: Individuals, and Groups

Box 1

People-Individuals

1910-1979

Mignon Brooks Coates, Shriner ball, 1958 (photo by Ada Cotes)

People-Groups

#4 Engine Company float, 1926 (courtesy of Aline Praither Williams)

1930-1939

1940-1949

Census Bureau staff w/ Curtis, 1940

Faculty from Cardoza High School year Book, 1945

1950-1959

Kate Edmunds and family (photo by Arbutus Dowery Moore), ca.1950s

1970-1980

Howard Stone's birthday party, 1975 (photo by Bernice Huey Lewis)

Series II: Special Subjects

Bruce Wahl's

1950 (photo by Joseph K. Lyons, courtesy of Mignon Coates)

1951-1955 (photos courtesy of Bruce Wahl)

Bruce Wahl's funeral (photo by William "Buddy" Toomer), 1983

Cadets

Mrs. Albert Turner and son Edward, ca.1936-1937

Randall and Shaw Platoons, May 1926 (photos by Scurlock Studios)

Individualist Club, 1973

Randall Jr. High students, 1929-1936, 1982 (2 folders)

Randall Jr. High students wrapping Maypole, ca. 1920s (photo by Scurlock Studios)

Randall playground (AKA Cardozo), 1936-1949

Randall Recreation Center, 1950-1959

Randall Reunions

April 21, 1956 (2 folders)

50th Anniversary, September 1973 (2 folders)

Box 2

Sports

- Cavalier Athletic Club, 1936-1949
- Oriental Tigers baseball team, 1926 (courtesy of Harry Craig)
- Willow Tree Football team & Athletic Club
 - 1936-1950s
 - 1934 team (photo by McNeil)
 - 1934 team (photographer unknown)
 - Willow Tree's Southwest Belles, ca. 1930s (courtesy of Walter Butler)
- Willow Tree Benevolent Association
 - 1974-1976
 - Picnics, 1974-1979

Series III: Family and Personal

- St. Augustine's Sanctuary Choir
 - 1917 (2 photos) (photographer unknown)
 - 1925 (photo by Scurlock Studios)
 - 1950-1959

Box 3

Youth, 1919-1930

Miner Teachers College

- 1934-1937
- College football team, 1935 (photographer unknown)
- 1937 Graduating class (photo by Scurlock Studios)
- Cheerleaders, 1939 (photo by Tressvant Anderson)

World War II

- 1945 (including General Eisenhower)
- Alvin Ford and shipmates, 1945 (courtesy of Alvin Ford)

1940-1949

1977-1982

Southwest historians Richard Ward and Owen Curtis, 1980 (photo by Mary E. Smith)

Series IV: Memorabilia

- Washington High School Cadets (courtesy of Raymond Smith), 1926
- Dramatic Carnival publicity and programs, 1926
- The Three Musketeers programs at Randall School, 1929
- Clippings, 1930-1980

Rent Check Receipt, 1949
Fathers and Sons Basketball Game, 1956
Willow Tree Benevolent Association picnic, 1974
Black Orpheus publicity and clips, 1979
Retirement Dinner flyer for William Curtis, Payne Elem. School Principal, 1980
Obituaries, 1980-1984

Box 4 (notebook)

BxW	Color	Location
1	1A-1F	M Street, SW, north side from Half Street and South Capitol
2	2A-2C	4 th Street, west side, between L & M streets
3	3A-3B	4 th and G Streets, northeast corner
4	4A-4B	N Street, southside from South Capitol toward Half street
5	5A-5C	John Marshall's Printing Shop, 4 th street, west side, between I & K streets
6	6A-6D	4 th Street, west side, between M & N streets
7	7A	2 nd and F streets, northwest corner, north side toward 3 rd street
8	8A-8B	2 nd and F streets, northeast corner, north side toward 1 st street
9	9A-9B	D Street, north side, between 1 st and 2 nd streets
10	10A-10B	2 nd and G streets, northwest corner
11	11A-11E	4 th and I streets, northeast corner, toward H street
12	12A-12B	4 th street, east side, between F & E streets
13	13A	1 st and Virginia Avenue. railroad viaduct looking east
14	14A	F street, north side, between 2 nd and 3 rd streets, toward 2 nd street
15	15A-15B	G Street, north side between 3 rd and 4 th streets, toward 4 th street
16	16A	3 rd and F streets, northeast corner, north side of F street, toward 2 nd street
17	17A-17C	1 st street, east side, from I street, toward K street
18	18A-18B	G street, north side, between 6 th and 7 th streets
19	19A	831 Delaware Avenue at I street, northwest corner (Hampton Curtis with William D. and Joseph O. Curtis)
20	20A-20C	Half and M streets, northeast corner toward L street
21	21A	Half and M streets, northwest corner, north side toward 1 st street
22	22A-22B	Dr. Nathaniel Johnson's drugstore, 3 rd and F streets, southeast corner
23	23A-23B	Delaware avenue & I street, northwest corner, toward 2 nd street, north side
26	26A-26C	2 nd and G streets, northwest corner, north side toward Delaware avenue
27	27A-27C	Joseph O. Curtis, B.S. Ed., Miner Teachers College